

# Chapter 11: A New Assignment

## Alice

Sometimes, Alice wished she could use her magic publicly, no matter what the consequences might be for herself or others. When she heard about a disaster that had occurred on the far side of Ibis, she wished she could have vanished there, getting relief supplies right to where they'd be needed, or if she'd forgotten an ingredient while grocery shopping, she longed for a world where she could make an instantaneous trip from home to a marketplace, removing many of the annoyances of a return trip. Once, during a hostage situation, she'd even vocally cursed the laws outlawing magic because they'd kept her from saving the victim.

Right now, she'd like to use her magic to scare the shit out of the men yelling at her mother.

"Are you *seriously* sending more soldiers to Crinas right now?" MP Washer hissed. "I know it's *your* province, but you can't believe their issues are more pressing than our economic concerns in Escad."

"James, please. We both know that the Escadese are only hurting themselves right now. If they want to continue bartering instead of accepting *revos* as currency, more power to them, for the moment at least. At some point, we'll need to address that problem if we don't want the practice undermining the Empire's economy," Zorana said, "but for now, people are *dying* in the sick camps scattered across Crinas, and if that doesn't move you, consider what our current hands-off approach might do in the upcoming election. How many of our fellow Innovationists represent various regions across that province?"

Clicking his tongue, MP Washer said, "You're missing the point."

Above the hands folded in front of her face, Zorana lifted an eyebrow.

"Which is?" she said.

"Look. We don't expect *you* to understand the problem," MP Atcher said from his colleague's side. "Someone of your—"

He ran his eyes over what he could see of Zorana's frame.

"—position doesn't have the... *time*, we'll say, to fully grasp the economic consequences of something like this."

Alice fought not to bristle at his implications while her mother lowered her hands to lie flat on the desk.

"Last I checked, only one person in this room has run a business for almost two decades," Zorana said. "A company, I might add, that's been one of the most profitable in the Empire for over half that time."

"And that's admirable, yes, but it implies a grasp of only microeconomics."

Wrinkling his nose, MP Atcher waved his hand as if to shoo away one of Zorana's greatest accomplishments.

"We need to think large scale right now."

Alice's mother had used to be one of the most passionate people in her life, someone who'd take great offense at these men's barely veiled insults, but her years serving in Parliament had helped her develop a thick skin.

With a small smile, she said, "Perhaps you're right, and in the coming months, we should discuss having someone more capable leading a committee to handle our problem in Escad. For now, however, a train full of soldiers and medical aid for Crinas has already departed the city. It would be foolish to bring it back now that they've gone, don't you think?"

After a moment spent blinking at her, MP Washer stiffly got to his feet with MP Atcher quickly following, and both men buttoned their jackets.

"If you won't see reason, there's no point in us staying here," MP Washer said. "With your permission, we'll take our leave."

Gesturing toward the door, Zorana said, "Of course. I wish you a good day, gentlemen."

They didn't deign to reply, and after the door had closed behind them. Alice circled her mother's desk to one of the chairs they'd abandoned. Meanwhile, Zorana hid her face in her hands.

"Well, I've lost those two's votes for the next few months," she groaned.

"I don't understand why they were so resistant to sending out emergency supplies," Alice said. "After you explained yourself, it seemed like the logical thing to do."

"Oh, silly monster. It has to do with money."

Her mother slapped her hands on her desk, turning tired eyes on Alice.

"Both of them have business interests tied up in Escad. If the people of that province continue to refuse using *revos*, they stand to lose a good chunk of their wealth."

Oh. Of course.

Slumping in her chair, Alice folded her hands on her stomach.

"And we all know that money's the only thing that matters to people like them," she said. "I'm sorry my suggestion has caused you so much trouble, mom."

Zorana softly chuckled.

"But it hasn't! I've meant to tackle Crinas—in so far as I can—for weeks now," she said, "but other problems have kept me from it."

Snorting, Alice said, "Really? Like what?"

"Oh, lots of things," Zorana said. "there's been a rash of unsolved murders running rampant in the capital for one, but my chief concern involves why I called you here this afternoon."

Murders in Flosa? Alice had heard that a few Ostiums had disappeared and that one of the missing had shown up dead. Was that what her mother was talking about?

Either way, it seemed problematic, and usually, something like this would be Alice's to handle. What could be contentious enough for her to get a different assignment?

"You're aware of the brewing conflict in Ostiu, of course," Zorana continued.

Despite that not being a question, Alice nodded. Any spy worth a damn would know how bad the situation there had been getting over the last few years, but Ostiu had always needed a broader touch, not the delicate changes that someone like the Empire's Ghost could make.

"I've been receiving disturbing reports from... people I trust there," Zorana said, shifting in place.

"Uncle Gus and Aunt Eliza?" Alice interjected.

She was still inside, waiting for her mother's answer. Was this related to Jonas' worry from his parents from days ago?

Pursing her lips, Zorana said, "I can't tell you where this information came from, but I can say that when you eventually arrive in Ostiu, you should probably visit my old friends first."

It *had* been Eliza and Gus! *Damnit!* Those two just couldn't stay retired.

Hissing out a sigh, Alice shook her head.

"All right. What sort of horror show am I walking into this time?"

At the question, Zorana became more uncomfortable than before, more than Alice had seen from her in a long time actually.

"After the last spot of unrest, Parliament sent Captain Ames and the soldiers under her command to Ostiu," she slowly said.

When she paused, as if waiting for a response, Alice crossed her arms, pretending she wasn't hugging herself in preparation for bad news.

"I've heard of her. She's a capable commanding officer from what I understand," she said. "Why? What's happened with her?"

Rubbing her face, Zorana said, "Ostiu happened. It seems to have broken her as it has with every other military leader we've sent there."

She slapped her hands to the desk's surface, grimacing.

"Captain Ames was doing well at first, keeping both the Ostium and Ibisian populations appeased," she continued, "but Ibisian property kept getting vandalized while supply caravans across the province began disappearing. Citizens from the greater Empire brought their complaints to Ames, and she handled them as best she could, relying on increasingly questionable methods to keep the potential dissidents subdued. Apparently, she may have crossed a line in the last two months."

*Avan* damn it all. Why couldn't Alice ever get a simple task, something that wouldn't end up turning her stomach while she was doing it?

"You need me to investigate what the captain's been accused of," she said. "Which is?"

Taking a deep breath, Zorana said, "Killing Ostium citizens."

For a moment, shock pinned Alice to her chair, letting her do nothing but stare at her mother, but once she'd shaken it off, she shot to her feet quickly enough that her chair rocked behind her.

"WHAT?"

Wincing, her mother nodded.

"I'm sorry, Alice," she said. "I wouldn't ask you to take care of this but--"

"No. This is something I *should* take care of," Alice growled before taking a calming breath and sitting, "but innocent until proven guilty, yes? Do you have the reports for me to review?"

Opening a drawer, Zorana pulled a folder out of it before offering it to Alice.

While she flipped it open, her mother said, "I'm sending someone with you as support this time. She knows about your *liiaresim*, so don't worry about using it. Once you're ready to go, you'll meet with her at that tavern you and Ana sometimes visit."

Already reading, Alice only grunted her acknowledgment, but skimming as she was, it didn't take her long to close the folder.

"Anything else I should know?" she said. "If not, I'd like to get started."

Her mother shook her head.

"Just be careful, my silly monster," she said, "and let me know when you get there?"

"Of course."

Standing, Alice leaned over the desk to quickly squeeze her mother's head to her chest. After releasing her, she gave Zorana a crooked smile.

"See you soon."

Zorana said something in response, but Alice didn't catch it. Already absorbed in the bloodsong, she had a split second to control her tune before popping into her home. Ana glanced up from her tilted table, dropping her smile when she saw Alice, but for the moment, Alice ignore her.

Stepping out onto the narrow landing at the top of the stairs that climbed the clocktower, Alice open the tiny closet found there, rooting around for the knapsack buried on its floor. It didn't take her long to pack everything she'd need. Even if this closet was *stupidly* disorganized, she'd done this often enough that her hands collected items without thought, all while she fumed.

When she entered the apartment again, Ana was wrapping up a gunny sack full of food for her. Turning her way with a grim expression in place, she placed what she'd prepared in Alice's waiting hand.

"It's bad?" she asked.

Alice nodded.

Wincing, Ana said, "I know you can't say what. Can I know where?"

Broken from her angry thundercloud, Alice searched this woman she loved, wondering if she should share. Ana got upset when she work in Ostiu, for good reason, but as always, Alice couldn't leave her in the dark when it came to the things she could reveal, not when Ana would otherwise worry about her.

"The homeland," she said.

As expected, Ana went stiff, looking away from Alice.

"That explains why you're so upset," she said.

"Hey," Alice said, nudging her chin until their gazes had met. "I promise you, love. I'm helping our people. Sometimes, it might not look like it, but I *am* doing everything I can to improve their lives."

Slumping, Ana said, "I know."

She took Alice's wrist so she could kiss the heel of her palm, looking up at Alice while doing it.

"You'll be safe?" Ana said against her skin.

With a half-smile, Alice said, "As much as I can be."

"Good."

Seizing her head, Ana kissed Alice hard, making her knees weak, before shoving her away so she could stalk back to the table.

"Go!" she called.

*Avan* above, Alice loved that woman.

After vanishing to the bottom of the clocktower, Alice made her way by mundane means to the tavern that her mother had mentioned earlier. She was curious who Zorana had assigned to her. Not many people knew about her magic, only those they could be *certain* wouldn't get her killed, whether accidentally or otherwise, and running through that short list, Alice wasn't sure who among them could be capable of sneak work.

Maybe Uncle Vaughn? He'd shown a surprising aptitude for all things covert in the time since... then, but even still, Alice didn't think he was good enough to match her. Who else could it be, though?

After stepping into the tavern, Alice took a familiar route to the bar while waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dark. She distractedly mumbled an order while scanning the place. Not many patrons filled it, and she didn't know any of them.

Puzzled, she cocked her head, leaning on the bar, and a shot glass slid to a stop by her elbow.

"A finger of brandy, neat," someone said. "I'm surprised. Considering how much your father and Ephiram liked Mad Gloom, I'd have thought you'd have a taste for it too."

Squeezing her eyes closed, Alice quickly downed her drink. Given who'd spoken, she'd probably need the alcohol's help to stay pleasant. But then, she turned on her support person for the next few days.

"Beatrice," she say. "*I'm* surprised. I thought you'd be too busy with your everyday work to help me."

Shrugging, Commander Beatrice of the secret police said, "I had some free time, and your mother asked me to join you. I obliged."

*Damn.* It was no wonder Alice had overlooked her until she'd decided to make her presence known. If she hadn't spoken to her, Alice would have discounted Beatrice as a minor MP's aid for the entirety of her stay here. How did she *do* that?

But Alice supposed skills like that were why Beatrice held the position that she did. Sometimes, she forgot the commander's prowess, but then, she got reminders like this.

"Of course mom did," she said, critically examining her companion now that the other woman had her attention. "She always worries when I go to Ostiu."

"Perhaps she fears that *charming* province will lure you into betraying her," Beatrice said with a wry grin.

"Riiiiight. That has to be it," Alice said, rolling her eyes. "Look. Are you ready to go? I want to get this over with."

Beatrice's grin widened.

"I'm sure you do," she said. "In answer, I'm just waiting for you to lead us to a quiet corner. I understand you need privacy for your... thing."

After the teasing from the beginning of her words, the disdain in that last one nearly bowled Alice over.

Wordlessly, she placed a couple of *revos* on the bar top before storming outside. Moving quickly, she got them into the closest abandoned alley before stopping short and spinning, hoping to make Beatrice stumble into her, but the commander merely pulled to a swift halt, still smiling that damn grin at her. When she extended a hand, Beatrice quizzically stared at it, making Alice start tapping her toe.

"I have to be touching you," she said. "Unless you *want* me to leave you here?"

Making a face, Beatrice said, "No. That would be bad."

She hesitantly rests a hand on Alice, and without delay, Alice folded them into the bloodsong, curious what the other woman's reaction to her magic would be.

Stoicism, apparently. When they returned to the physical world, Beatrice drew a single, slow breath, staring into the distance, but that was it. No nausea. No loss of balance. It was the most composed someone had been after Alice had used her magic on them.

She kept her eyes narrowed at the commander, wondering how the *hell* she was so calm, until the other woman glanced at her and waved ahead.

"Well?" she said. "I assume you got us close to a train station. We can use that to reach Zoln." Right. Why they were here.

Blinking, Alice took in the forest around them, spinning in a slow circle.

“That’s a good assumption,” she said. “The train station is... this way.”

At least, that was what Alice thought. Rolling her shoulders to loosen them, she set off with Beatrice behind her. Ostiu awaited them.

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